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## **‘In’ or ‘Near’? Heavenly Access and Christian Identity in Hebrews**

### **Introduction**

The Letter to the Hebrews addresses an audience which, the author believes, faces both the external pressure of persecution and the internal danger of sluggishness. These factors, whether connected or not, threaten to weaken the audience’s adherence to the social identity common to this group of first-century Jesus believers; indeed, some have already stopped attending their communal meetings. To combat this danger, the author seeks to present a compelling vision of the identity of God’s people, and on this basis to exhort his addressees to a renewed commitment to the group. One striking aspect of the picture he develops is the privileged heavenly access enjoyed by God’s people through Christ. Yet here we hit a problem: this access is portrayed as rest, the future goal of a pilgrim people, but also as sanctuary, the present possession of a priestly people. Such a dual portrayal is at best confusing, and at worst contradictory; it threatens to undermine the coherence of the identity the author portrays, and thereby the effectiveness of his ‘word of exhortation’. This essay argues that Hebrews paints a consistent picture of immediate heavenly aid for God’s people in the present, and full and final heavenly entry at the eschaton, thereby encouraging the audience to identify with the group now and into the future.

This study focuses on the literary and theological construction of identity, rather than the social instantiation of that identity in the historical community to which the letter was originally sent, although it sets out from the historical basis that the addressees’ community membership was (as the author perceived it) under threat.<sup>1</sup> This in itself makes Hebrews ripe

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<sup>1</sup> In the case of Hebrews, for which we have no firm temporal or geographical – let alone archaeological – context, any historical supposition as to the audience’s ethnic/religious identity can proceed only via a literary examination of the letter itself. In practice, then, text and history are not so sharply

for a study of identity formation,<sup>2</sup> because conflict both threatens to damage or dissolve social identity and can simultaneously, as is widely noted, be a catalyst for strengthening or solidifying identity.<sup>3</sup> In addition, Hebrews' location in the second half of the first century AD places it broadly within the emerging early Christian movement;<sup>4</sup> as a minority within society at large, and potentially differing from other groups of Jesus believers, for the original audience questions of identity and adherence would have been all the more fluid and pressing.<sup>5</sup>

The tension between pilgrim and priestly identity in Hebrews is widely remarked and has been linked to a division in scholarship as well, with Protestants evincing a preference for the wandering people and Roman Catholics preferring the sacrificial cult.<sup>6</sup> This is indicative of the importance of both kinds of material in Hebrews for the formation of Christian identity, and at the same time underlines the need for a more holistic treatment of the letter.

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distinguishable. See Ole Jakob Filtvedt, *The Identity of God's People and the Paradox of Hebrews*, WUNT 2.400 (Tübingen, 2015), 36–44.

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews has not been researched from a social identity perspective to the same extent as other parts of the NT, but note the significant studies by Filtvedt, *Identity of God's People*, and Richard W. Johnson, *Going Outside the Camp: The Sociological Function of the Levitical Critique in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, JSNTSup 209 (London, 2001). Johnson applies Mary Douglas' group/grid taxonomy, classifying Hebrews' 'ideal society' as weak group/weak grid. He rightly notes Hebrews' emphasis on boundary-crossing, but wrongly infers that these boundaries are permeable; rather, they are to be crossed but not re-crossed, suggesting a strong(er) group.

<sup>3</sup> David G. Horrell, "'Becoming Christian': Solidifying Christian Identity and Content', in *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Approaches*, ed. by Anthony J. Blasi, Paul-André Turcotte, and Jean Duhaime (Walnut Creek, CA, 2002), 313–15.

<sup>4</sup> Horrell, 'Becoming Christian', 315–31; for Hebrews see p. 325.

<sup>5</sup> Filtvedt, *Identity of God's People*, 34–36.

<sup>6</sup> William G. Johnsson, 'Cultus of Hebrews in Twentieth-Century Scholarship', *ExpTim* 89 (1978), 104–8.

While it would be harder to point to any such divide today, the apparent dichotomy between a future-orientated, eschatological, horizontal journey towards rest and present-orientated, mystical, vertical contact with the sanctuary remains a sticking point in reading Hebrews.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the question of access to the heavenly realm lies at the heart of the differences between these motifs in Hebrews: can heaven be accessed now, as the priestly imagery suggests, or does it remain inaccessible until finally entered definitively, as the pilgrimage motif seems to imply? For this reason, a study of approach and entrance terminology takes us to the nub of the issue.

I will argue that Hebrews maintains a careful distinction whereby εἰσερχομαι describes Jesus' past and believers' future entrance into heaven, whilst προσέρχομαι describes the way believers approach (but do not enter) heaven in the present.<sup>8</sup> I will treat each tense in turn, broadly in order of appearance in Hebrews. In each section we will pay attention to i) *who* enters/approaches, ii) *what* is entered/approached, and iii) *when*.

### **When Do the Saints Go Marching In?**

The verb εἰσερχομαι appears eleven times in Hebrews 3–4, all relating to entrance into rest; a further six occurrences come in Hebrews 6 and 9–10, all relating to Jesus' entry into the

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<sup>7</sup> One recent attempt to address the dichotomy is Jared C. Calaway, *The Sabbath and the Sanctuary: Access to God in the Letter to the Hebrews and its Priestly Context*, WUNT 2.349 (Tübingen, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> The most thorough examination of these terms in Hebrews, arguing for a distinction along these lines, is John M. Scholer, *Proleptic Priests: Priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, JSNTSup 49 (Sheffield, 1991), 91–184. I think Hebrews shows greater terminological consistency than Scholar allows. I am grateful to Scott Mackie for sharing in draft form his forthcoming thorough critique of the view defended here, “‘Let Us Draw Near... but Not Too Near’: A Critique of the Attempted Distinction between ‘Drawing Near’ and ‘Entering’ in Hebrews’ Entry Exhortations”, in *Listen, Understand, and Obey: Essays on Hebrews in Honor of \_\_\_\_\_*, ed. by C. Friedeman (Eugene, OR, 2016).

celestial sanctuary.<sup>9</sup> Closer investigation will confirm that εἰσερχομαι is used consistently in two distinct but related ways.

The term first occurs in the citation of Ps. 95.11 (LXX 94.11) in Heb. 3.11, in the curse on the unfaithful wilderness generation. The phrase εἰ εἰσελεύσονται εἰς τὴν κατάπαυσίν μου literally reads ‘if they will enter into my rest’, but the underlying Hebrew leaves unspoken the apodosis of a traditional curse form: ‘if they enter, I will do such and such’. The sense is thus ‘they will *not* enter my rest’.<sup>10</sup> In a further five instances the verb denotes the wilderness generation’s failure to enter. Hebrews 3.18, 19, and the second occurrence of εἰσερχομαι in 4.6 affirm that the wilderness generation did not enter because of unbelief/disobedience. The phrase from the Psalm is quoted again verbatim in 4.3 and 5, emphatically underlining the author’s argument that precisely because they did not enter, the rest must be open to others. That is to say, i) *wilderness and conquest generations* did not enter ii) *divine rest* iii) *in the time of Moses and Joshua*.

The other five instances of εἰσερχομαι in Hebrews 3–4 relate to the audience, either directly or indirectly. An explicit application to the audience is found in 4.3 and 11. The latter brings the section to a close with a climactic exhortation to strive to enter God’s rest (hortatory subjunctive of σπουδάζω with aorist infinitive εἰσελθεῖν), implying that the audience has not yet entered, but may enter in the future. Hebrews 4.3 presents a more complex case: there is temporal ambiguity in the statement ‘we who have believed enter (εἰσερχόμεθα) that rest’. This could be taken as a real present<sup>11</sup> – we enter now – or as a

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<sup>9</sup> With the exception of 10.5, addressed below, where he enters the κόσμος.

<sup>10</sup> Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia, 1989), 116 and n. 37.

<sup>11</sup> So for example B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The Greek Text*, 3rd edn (London, 1920), 96; Samuel Bénétreau, *L’Épître aux Hébreux*, Commentaire Évangélique de la Bible, 2 vols (Vaux-sur-Seine, 1988), 1.172–73.

futuristic present – we will enter. The context supports a future entry: rest is the subject of a ‘promise’ (4.1), it ‘remains’ (4.6, 9), and far from already having ceased from works (4.10) the audience is exhorted to ‘strive to enter’ it (4.11).<sup>12</sup> Those commentators who see εἰσερχόμεθα as temporally present in fact tend to focus on the continuous aspect, allowing for process;<sup>13</sup> in practice this amounts to an admission that rest remains to be entered in the future. So for example Attridge states that εἰσερχόμεθα ‘should not be taken *simply* as a futuristic present, referring *only* to the eschaton [...], but as a reference to the complex process on which “believers” [...] are even now engaged, although this process *will certainly have an eschatological consummation*’.<sup>14</sup> Those who emphasize the continuous aspect also allow an element of contingency,<sup>15</sup> which is in line with 3.6 and 14 (‘we are Christ’s house/partners, *if* we hold fast...’), and which suggests that if believers do not ‘go on entering’ the rest they will not ultimately be found to have entered it. That is, even the continuous reading of εἰσερχόμεθα stops short of saying that believers enter rest in the present.

The three occurrences of εἰσερχομαι that are applied indirectly to the audience come in 4.1, 6, and 10. Verse 1 combines the statement that a promise of entering rest remains open with a solemn warning to the audience: ‘let us fear, lest any one of you be deemed to have

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<sup>12</sup> So Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI, 1993), 246; Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI, 2010), 164–66.

<sup>13</sup> Mackie overstates his case by describing 4.3 as ‘a singular, stunning declaration of eschatological fulfilment’, and unjustifiably translates εἰσερχόμεθα with an English perfect: ‘we have entered that rest’. Scott D. Mackie, *Eschatology and Exhortation in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, WUNT 2.223 (Tübingen, 2007), 49.

<sup>14</sup> Attridge, *Hebrews*, 126 (emphasis added).

<sup>15</sup> Most explicitly David A. deSilva, ‘Entering God’s Rest: Eschatology and the Socio-Rhetorical Strategy of Hebrews’, *TrinJ* 21 (2000), 29–32, who casts his view as a middle way between true and futuristic present.

fallen short’.<sup>16</sup> Present fear will prevent them from falling short of future entrance. Verse 6 offers a similar, if more general, perspective on rest: ‘it remains open for some to enter it’; the warning note persists in the reminder that the wilderness generation failed to enter because they disobeyed.

The meaning of Heb. 4.10 is more contested. In short, disagreement centres on the substantive aorist participle ὁ εἰσελθών, ‘the one who enters/entered’, which could denote believers<sup>17</sup> or Jesus. I find the latter reading preferable,<sup>18</sup> but either is consistent with the overall picture of the use of εἰσερχομαι in Hebrews that is developing. If the statement is taken with reference to the believer, the main verb κατέπαυσεν functions as a gnomic or timeless aorist, expressing a general truth and not a particular temporally-bound fact: ‘all those who enter rest also rest from their works’ (cf. NRSV). Although this statement of itself says nothing about when rest is entered, since believers have not ceased from their works we infer that they have not yet entered rest. If, by contrast, the verse is taken with reference to Jesus, κατέπαυσεν refers to a past event: Jesus has rested from his works (of salvation), an act or state which is logically preceded by his entrance into rest. In this case, ὁ εἰσελθών fits the pattern for εἰσερχομαι which will be observed in Hebrews’ central section: it describes i) *Jesus’* entry ii) into a *heavenly sphere* iii) in *the past*. If the christological reading is adopted, this occurrence of εἰσερχομαι is remarkable not for how it is used – which is consistent with one of the two uses of the verb in Hebrews – but for where it comes, and it could serve as one small indication that these apparently divergent motifs are more integrated than they first appear.

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<sup>16</sup> Translation from Attridge, *Hebrews*, 122, conveying the force of φοβέω, against the somewhat anaemic ‘let us take care’ (NRSV).

<sup>17</sup> Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 255–57.

<sup>18</sup> Nicholas J. Moore, ‘Jesus as “The One Who Entered His Rest”’: The Christological Reading of Hebrews 4.10’, *JSNT* 36 (2014), 383–400.

To return to the broader question: in relation to the audience, εἰσερχομαι in Hebrews 3–4 describes i) *the addressees* entering ii) *divine rest* iii) *in the future*. The wilderness and conquest generations’ failure to enter undergirds this point, which in turn forms the basis for the exhortations to keep going towards rest which punctuate the whole discussion (3.12–13; 4.1, 11). To be sure, such rest is not far off or distant.<sup>19</sup> Rather, it is imminent – like Israel at Kadesh Barnea (Numbers 13–14), the audience stands on the threshold of the promise – yet for all that it remains emphatically future; indeed, its imminence and precariousness hinge on its very futurity.

### **Thou within the Veil Hast Entered**

Of the remaining six occurrences of εἰσερχομαι, three straightforwardly indicate Jesus’ entrance into the heavenly sanctuary: Jesus entered inside the curtain (6.20);<sup>20</sup> Jesus entered the most holy place once for all (9.12);<sup>21</sup> Jesus did not enter a handmade sanctuary but heaven itself (9.24). In each case the form is a singular active aorist indicative, εἰσῆλθεν, ‘he entered’.<sup>22</sup> Where the Septuagint uses three terms (εἰσερχομαι, εἰσπορεύομαι, and εἴσεμι)

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<sup>19</sup> So Albert Vanhoye, ‘Longue marche ou accès tout proche ? Le contexte biblique de Hébreux 3,7–4,11’, *Bib* 49 (1968), 9–26, correcting Käsemann’s less urgent conception of ‘wandering’. Ernst Käsemann, *Das wandernde Gottesvolk: Eine Untersuchung zum Hebräerbrief* (Göttingen, 1939). Also deSilva, ‘Entering God’s Rest’, 32.

<sup>20</sup> Which tabernacle curtain is contested; the description of Jesus as high priest (ἀρχιερέως) in 6.20 suggests it is the veil between holy and most holy place. So Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 347.

<sup>21</sup> I take τὰ ἅγια (with the article) in Hebrews to indicate the inner as opposed to the outer compartment of the tabernacle, given that in every occurrence the high priest’s entry in the context of Yom Kippur is in view. So Bénétreau, *Hébreux*, 2.72; Kenneth L. Schenck, *Cosmology and Eschatology in Hebrews: The Settings of the Sacrifice*, SNTSMS 143 (Cambridge, 2007), 145–47.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. the perfect of διέρχομαι describing Jesus passing through the heavens, 4.14.



interchangeably to translate  $\text{קודש}$  in a cultic context,<sup>23</sup> Hebrews restricts itself to only one of these,  $\text{εἰσερχομαι}$ , to describe entering the most holy place.

Two of the other instances are only slightly less straightforward. In 6.19 hope is likened to a sure and steadfast anchor, the present possession of the believer, which enters ( $\text{εἰσερχομένην}$ ) inside the curtain, where, as v. 20 clarifies, Jesus has entered as our forerunner. The combination of imagery is certainly odd – an anchor entering a tabernacle curtain? – but the overall sense is clear, and mirrors that of v. 20. The purpose of an anchor is to be lodged somewhere in a way that a ship cannot be, but in a way that secures the vessel so long as the two remain connected (neatly illustrated by contrasting Acts 27.29 with 40). The anchor of hope is inside the most holy place, and the believer's call in this life is not to try to reach that anchor itself, but simply to cling on to the rope. The difference between the images of anchor and 'forerunner' ( $\text{πρόδρομος}$ ) in the following verse is that the latter suggests the believer will ultimately follow Jesus inside the curtain. The use of the participle  $\text{εἰσερχομένην}$  with anchor is unusual, and could just about be stretched to mean 'extending' or 'reaching' within the curtain, but the incongruity is deliberate and draws attention to the active sense of the verb, which is reinforced by its recurrence in v. 20.<sup>24</sup> The anchor of hope is *in* the most holy place because it, like Jesus, has already entered within the curtain.

Not dissimilar to Heb. 6.19, the present indicative  $\text{εἰσέρχεται}$  in 9.25 is closely related to a description of Jesus' entrance into the heavenly sanctuary. The argument of 9.24-28 proceeds through a series of negative clarifications in vv. 24-26a to a climactic statement of Jesus' once-for-all eschatological sacrifice in v. 26b, which is then expanded by comparison with human death in vv. 27-28. The negative statements clarify the differences between Jesus' sacrifice and the Yom Kippur rite: Christ did not enter a handmade sanctuary, but

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<sup>23</sup> Scholer, *Proleptic Priests*, 150.

<sup>24</sup> Attridge, *Hebrews*, 184.

heaven itself; he offered himself not repeatedly, but once. The author adds a parenthetical remark to explain the mention of ‘offering repeatedly’: ‘like the high priest enters the most holy place every year’. This states a general, gnomic truth about the tabernacle system; it is incorrect to see it as temporally specific, and indeed most commentators recognize that we cannot infer from the present tense that the Jerusalem temple was still standing when the author wrote. The use of εἰσέρχομαι underlines the parallel with Jesus, even as the continuous aspect of the present in combination with πολλάκις and contrast to ἅπαξ highlights a difference: just as the high priest enters the most holy place, so Jesus entered the heavenly most holy place; but unlike the high priest who enters annually, Jesus entered once.

The significance of εἰσέρχομαι here is seen more fully if we consider 9.6-7, which contrasts the priestly with the high priestly service in the tabernacle: ‘the priests go into the first tent regularly to perform divine worship, but only the high priest into the second once a year’. Strikingly, the verb used of regular priestly service is εἴσεμι and not εἰσέρχομαι, and it is omitted when describing the high priest.<sup>25</sup> The ordinary Levitical priests ‘go in’ to the tabernacle’s outer compartment, but they do not ‘enter’ in the special sense Hebrews reserves for accessing the most holy place. The contrast between priests and the high priest forms part of an elaborate typology extending throughout 9.1-14 in which Christ, like the high priest, is said to have entered (εἰσῆλθεν) once for all (9.12, ἐφάπαξ drawing out both the similarities and dissimilarities with ἅπαξ τοῦ ἐνιαυτοῦ, v. 7).

The final occurrence of εἰσέρχομαι comes in Heb. 10.5, which introduces a citation from Psalm 40. The present participle εἰσερχόμενος locates the speech concurrently with the action of entering (*as* Christ enters, he says) – the aorist participle εἰσελθών would by

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Exod. 28.29, 35 where εἴσεμι translates אָבַד, describing Aaron’s entry into the sanctuary, without specifying inner or outer. In using εἴσεμι for priests and εἰσέρχομαι for high priests Hebrews displays greater terminological specificity than the LXX.

contrast suggest antecedent action (*after* Christ has entered, he says) – and does not reflect a present temporal setting. The difficulty for my case lies rather in what is entered, ‘the world’ (κόσμος). This is a clear reference to the incarnation,<sup>26</sup> and as such it cuts against the hitherto consistent use of εἰσέρχομαι to describe Jesus’ entrance into heaven on the model of high priestly entrance into the tabernacle.

In fact, however, this final occurrence of εἰσέρχομαι in Hebrews is the exception that proves the rule. Both in Hebrews 3–4 and in the cultic section, the verb has been used to describe the transition from one domain or sphere of existence into another. At a trivial level some such transition is true of every act of entering, but Hebrews uses εἰσέρχομαι only for major transitions: from wilderness into promised land; from a place and state of labour into a place and state of rest; from a profane into a sacred space; from ordinary into sacred time; from earth into heaven.<sup>27</sup> In this light, Christ ‘entering the world’ at his incarnation does not represent a completely different and unprecedented use of the verb, but rather a simple ‘redirection’;<sup>28</sup> he crosses the same border between earthly and heavenly realms, but in the opposite direction. And he does so in order to cross back, as stated just a few verses further on in 10.10 (where ἐφάπαξ recalls the explicit mention of entrance in 9.12).

In summary, in the central section of Hebrews εἰσέρχομαι describes i) *Jesus’* entrance ii) into *another ontological realm* iii) in *the past*, and that in all but one case his entrance into the *heavenly most holy place* is in view.

### **Nearer, my God, to Thee**

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<sup>26</sup> Unlike 1.6, where the sense of οἰκουμένη (meaning ‘inhabited world’ and thus normally synonymous with κόσμος) is contested (cf. 2.6 where it denotes the coming world).

<sup>27</sup> In this connection, note that εἰσάγω and ἄγω describe the same fundamental boundary-crossing action, but with God as the subject leading the Son (1.6) and the sons (2.10) into the heavenly realm.

<sup>28</sup> Attridge, *Hebrews*, 273.

In contrast to Jesus' past entrance into the sanctuary and the addressees' anticipated future entrance into rest and concomitant call to keep going, in two major exhortations (4.14-16 and 10.19-25)<sup>29</sup> we find a call to approach God in heaven in the present (προσερχόμεθα). The other occurrences of προσέρχομαι in Hebrews also describe present action.

In the Septuagint προσέρχομαι can describe a cultic approach,<sup>30</sup> both by the whole people of God and by the Levitical priests,<sup>31</sup> but this sense is by no means universal and the verb often describes approach generally, be that in a fight (Deut. 25.11), to speak with someone (Gen. 42.24), or for sexual relations (Exod. 19.15). It is nevertheless significant that over a quarter of the occurrences of προσέρχομαι in the LXX Pentateuch relate explicitly to the tabernacle or tent of meeting,<sup>32</sup> a proportion which rises to almost half if we include references to Sinai, the Passover, or the congregation of Israel,<sup>33</sup> all of which have cultic connections. The term's setting within Hebrews remains primary, but this biblical context is not unimportant.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Structurally, these exhortations mirror one another and demarcate the central, cultic section of the letter.

<sup>30</sup> BDAG, 'προσέρχομαι', 878; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 141. A cultic sense is found in contemporaneous Jewish and Greco-Roman literature, cf. Philo, *Deus Imm.* 8; Plutarch, *E Delph.* 2.

<sup>31</sup> Cf., e.g., Lev. 9.5 with 7.

<sup>32</sup> Twelve of forty-seven occurrences: Lev. 9.5, 7, 8; 21.17, 18, 21, 23; 22.3; Num. 17.5; 18.3, 4, 22. Thirty of the forty-seven instances translate קרב, but it is hard to discern terminological consistency in Hebrew, as קרב is used in both cultic and non-cultic expressions and, vice versa, several of the cultic 'approaches' are described with other verbs such as נגש and בוא (e.g., Lev. 21.21, 23).

<sup>33</sup> Twenty-two; the ten additional references are: Exod. 12.48; 16.9; 34.32; Lev. 10.4, 5; Num. 9.6; 27.2; Deut. 4.11; 5.23, 27.

<sup>34</sup> The LXX makes a more careful terminological distinction than does the MT, for example translating בוא with προσέρχομαι in Lev. 21.23 and Num. 4.19 to avoid the suggestion that anyone other than the high priest enters the most holy place; Scholer, *Proleptic Priests*, 91–94, 201. Far from imposing this LXX distinction onto

On close examination, all seven occurrences of προσέρχομαι in Hebrews have a cultic setting and therefore carry the sense of approaching God in worship.<sup>35</sup> The one possible exception is in 11.6, which I will tackle first, together with the other substantival participles at 7.25 and 10.1. In 11.6 a more generic reference is made to the prerequisite condition of faith in God's existence and goodness for 'the one who approaches' (τὸν προσερχόμενον); yet the fact that God is explicitly named as the object of the approach, and the mention of sacrifice in the near context by Abel (11.4) and Abraham (11.17), suggest a cultic nuance. In 10.1 τοὺς προσερχομένους denotes old covenant worshippers, who by inference draw near to God, or at least to the tabernacle. In 7.25 people approach God through Christ, the perpetually interceding high priest. The verb ἐγγίζω functions similarly a few verses earlier, describing the better hope 'through which we approach God' (7.19), as is made clear by comparing the two verses:

7.19:	ἐγγίζομεν	δι' ἧς	τῷ θεῷ
7.25:	τοὺς προσερχομένους	δι' αὐτοῦ	τῷ θεῷ

Notably, believers approach in this way under both old (10.1) and new covenants (7.19, 25; 11.6). Thus i) *God's people* have always been able to approach him ii) in *his sanctuary* iii) in *their present*.

This impression is confirmed by 12.18 and 22. Here the perfect indicative προσεληλύθατε is used twice, first to describe Mt Sinai, which the audience have not approached, and secondly to describe Mt Zion, which they have approached. While the

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Hebrews, as Mackie, 'Critique', suggests, I suggest that Hebrews is *more* consistent in its distinction of προσέρχομαι, εἴσεμι, and εἰσέρχομαι, extending the trend found in the LXX.

<sup>35</sup> Note the presence of Jesus as high priest (4.14-16; 7.24-25; 10.21-22); sacrifices (10.1); the πανήγυρις (12.18, 22). This is not to claim their setting is exclusively cultic, merely that the cultic nuance has a prominent part to play.

perfect tense describes a past act, it also evokes continuing effect in the present: you have drawn near, such that you are now near. The contrast symbolizes the two covenants, one foreboding and the other festive. Yet, crucially, the audience is not said to have entered the heavenly Jerusalem: however appealing the party, there is no suggestion that the audience is already among the angels, the assembly of the firstborn, or the perfected, righteous spirits.<sup>36</sup> That the audience has not approached Mt Sinai evokes the fact that the Israelites did approach it (Deut. 4.11); in both covenants God's people approach a mountain, and in neither case do they go up onto it. The difference between the two lies not in the present but in the future when, after their death (Heb. 9.27) or Jesus' return (9.28), the addressees will proceed into the heavenly Jerusalem – along with the faithful from the old covenant (11.10, 13-16, 39-40).

The final two occurrences of προσέρχομαι are the hortatory subjunctives at 4.16 and 10.22. In both cases the context is clearly cultic and the appeal is for present and ongoing approach (foregrounding the continuous aspect of the present tense). I will focus on 10.19-25 because this passage also refers to the 'entrance' (εἵσοδος) believers have and the 'way' (ὁδός) Jesus has inaugurated for them. As with the English noun 'entrance', εἵσοδος can denote the act of entering or the means of entry.<sup>37</sup> The preposition εἰς could suggest the verbal sense, 'we have confidence *to enter*' (so most translations), but it can equally mean 'with regard to', as for example in 7.14 ('Moses said nothing concerning [εἰς] that tribe'; cf. 6.10; 9.9; 12.3). Hebrews 10.20 gives further information: 'which (entrance) Jesus inaugurated for us as a new and living way'.<sup>38</sup> It is hard to see how an act of entering could be inaugurated,

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<sup>36</sup> Scholer, *Proleptic Priests*, 147.

<sup>37</sup> For the former cf. Acts 13.24; 1 Thess. 1.9; 2.1; for the latter, 2 Pet. 1.11.

<sup>38</sup> The relative ἣν refers back to εἵσοδον, not παρρησία, given the parallel with ὁδός; Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 518.

and the clarification that the εἴσοδος is a ‘way’ (ὁδός) confirms the concrete sense of the noun.<sup>39</sup>

Believers have confidence with regard to the entrance to the most holy place, the new and living way Jesus has inaugurated; that is, they can be confident that there is a way in. Verse 21 adds that they have a great priest, a reminder of the need for and availability of effective mediation. It is striking, then, that vv. 19-21 should form the basis for an exhortation to *draw near* and not *to enter* in v. 22. If we have an entrance, surely we should avail ourselves of it and enter? Yet this would be to miss the careful use of cultic imagery: the way in to the sanctuary and the high priest serve to ground the worshippers’ confidence that the cult is effective, and so they draw near to worship, but they themselves do not go in, at least at this point.<sup>40</sup> To claim otherwise is to sidestep Jesus’ role as mediator.<sup>41</sup> Like the old covenant people the audience draw near to the heavenly tabernacle, or even perhaps like the old covenant priests they draw near within the outer sanctuary,<sup>42</sup> but they do not now enter the most holy place. We draw near to God, and all the more as the Day draws near to us (10.25), but until that Day we do not enter.

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<sup>39</sup> So Attridge, *Hebrews*, 284. *Contra* W. Michaelis, ‘εἴσοδος’, *TDNT* 5:103–9; BDAG ‘εἴσοδος’, 294. Contrast 9.8, where the ὁδός was not yet manifest, which highlights the more certain access available under the new covenant.

<sup>40</sup> By a similar token, approaching the throne of grace (4.16) is not said to entail entering or passing through the heavens (4.14); the notion of approaching the mercy seat is not found in the LXX, so provides little guidance either way.

<sup>41</sup> Mackie, ‘Critique’, overemphasizes the family affinity between Jesus and believers, thereby underplaying Jesus’ mediating role (8.6).

<sup>42</sup> This latter suggestion would accord with a cosmological view of the tabernacle, with earth as the outer and heaven the inner sanctuary. So, e.g., Schenck, *Cosmology and Eschatology*, 151–54.

Examination of προσέρχομαι in Hebrews shows that i) *believers* draw near ii) *to God in the heavenly sanctuary* iii) in their *present day-to-day lives*. While the author makes the privilege of this access very clear, in part by contrast with the old covenant,<sup>43</sup> he stops short of suggesting that believers enter heaven in the present, instead giving prominence to the priestly mediation of Jesus.

## Conclusion

The foregoing investigation shows that within Hebrews εἰσέρχομαι is used to describe Jesus and believers entering another ontological domain, whereas προσέρχομαι is used only of believers drawing near God in worship, and never of Jesus. Nowhere are the two verbs ‘synonymous cultic terms which are used interchangeably’;<sup>44</sup> rather, they are carefully distinguished. When the place entered is taken into account, εἰσέρχομαι can further be divided between Jesus’ entrance into the most holy place (or in one case into the world, 10.5) and believers’ entrance into rest. And when time is considered, a tripartite temporal sequence emerges: in the past Jesus entered the heavenly most holy place; in the present believers are regularly to approach (but not enter) that sanctuary; in the future believers will enter heavenly rest.

This scheme offers a coherent picture of Hebrews’ conception of access, yet without entirely flattening the tensions noted in the introduction. For all that we might infer that believers will enter the heavenly most holy place at the eschaton, this is never explicitly stated, and thus we should be cautious of supposing that rest and sanctuary ‘collapse into

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<sup>43</sup> Well demonstrated by Scott D. Mackie, ‘Ancient Jewish Mystical Motifs in Hebrews’ Theology of Access and Entry Exhortations’, *NTS* 58 (2012), 88–104.

<sup>44</sup> Scholer, *Proleptic Priests*, 182.



divine singularity'.<sup>45</sup> Rather, approach to the sanctuary and entrance into rest present complimentary images of the access to God enjoyed by his people: in both cases the people are near and not yet in, but the former describes the present and the latter the future.

In the face of both internal and external threats to adherence to group identity, the author portrays a coherent and sweeping vision of heavenly access. This reality is based on the definitive past grounds of Jesus' heavenly entry, and is the subject of both present exhortation and future promise. It therefore carries great privilege, which forms a strong motivation to continue to belong to this group. Yet at the same time, the believer's proximity to heaven is precarious, a picture with which the audience would identify strongly given their present difficulties. Because they are near but not in, their location is liminal: they are on the threshold but could fall short of entering the rest; they draw near to but have not entered the sanctuary; they have approached but have not yet gone up onto Mt Zion. As is clear from Hebrews' stark warnings, such precariousness is the other side of the coin to the privileged access afforded by Christ, and supplements the positive motivation this provides with a fearful alternative scenario. God's people have a borderland identity: they live on earth and not yet in heaven, but heaven's realities are near at hand, and heaven itself stands open for those who persevere to the end.

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<sup>45</sup> Calaway, *Sabbath and Sanctuary*, 206.